



## Thomas, M. Wynn. The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry [review]

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## REVIEWS

M. Wynn Thomas. *The Lunar Light of Whitman's Poetry*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1987. 313 pp. \$22.50.

Professor Thomas describes his wide-ranging study as "a series of roughly chronological, semi-independent essays, which nevertheless I hope will supplement each other satisfactorily"; and for the most part they do so very well. The volume examines Whitman's poetry in three of its principal relationships: the political and historical ideals of the Jacksonian era, nature and esthetics, and the impact of the Civil War.

Although some readers may feel that Whitman's mystic and confessional tendencies have been scantied, Thomas analyzes a most generous selection of the poems (has anyone dealt so well with "A Song for Occupations" or "Our Old Feuillage"?), relating them to their historical moment, to the broadest spectrum of British and American Romanticism, and with singular skill, to the prose writings. By rehistoricizing them, he often reveals the psychological ferment that gave them relevance and discloses significant sources of their esthetic appeal. His work demonstrates that those who read Whitman's poems primarily as a language experiment or a revelation of his psyche may be missing out on a major dimension of the poetry. Thomas's originality, critical intelligence, and exquisite sensitivity to language mark the book as a truly significant contribution to Whitman studies and to the criticism of American literature.

Apparently influenced by the new historicism, Thomas demonstrates the political-historical nature of much of Whitman's poetry. He shows how Whitman reacted to the politics of his day and the process by which he transmuted politics and history into poetry. In the mid-nineteenth century, when the United States was becoming an advanced capitalist power, Whitman's abiding faith in the Jacksonian ideal of democratic agrarianism and freehold participatory democracy tempered his perception of the flawed society around him. And Whitman's sense of the contradictions between his hopeful vision and harsh reality often defined the tensions that underlay his poetry. His best work, Thomas feels, grew out of "his involvement in the hectic disorderliness of the contemporary scene." As long as he kept this involvement, he created vital poetry. In post-Civil War society, as the hopeful vision seemed less applicable and as his engagement with his own times faltered, he eventually "dwindled" from a poet to a "mere prophet" of America's future greatness.

Thomas contends that Whitman's early poems express nostalgia for an individualistic, spiritually ennobling artisanal culture that the poet believed had flourished prior to the depersonalization of the individual in "the commodified world of objects" that characterizes the advanced stages of capitalism. (That earlier world is glorified, for example, in the vital, unalienated craftsmen who appear in "A Song for Occupations.") This ideal of the free democratic individual remained the touchstone against which Whitman tested American life. Although a self-styled poet of the kosmos, Whitman viewed his society with the eyes of a democratic individualist, even a Locofoco. He rejected the "psycopathology of prudence," we are told, in favor

of "a sexually sublime" sense of one's self and one's world. By analyzing Whitman's concepts of the ego and of adhesiveness essentially in terms of their social relevance, Thomas interprets "Song of Myself" as a poem rooted in the individualism of an artisanal age and meant to inspire the readers of a more troubled advanced industrial age.

The second major segment of *Lunar Light* deals with Whitman's esthetics and his treatment of nature. Thomas shows that Whitman built his poetry on the reciprocal interaction of man and nature, and that his nature poems are refractions of his own shifting attitude toward the ego and society—what the poet called "the politics of nature." The link between man and landscape created a particular syntax from which the poetry emerged. In his long essay on "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," a critical *tour de force*, Thomas relates the poem to the luminist painters whose works, frequently seascapes, spiritualized their subjects in a steady soft light and conveyed a sense of optimism. Thomas sees "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as a democratic vision which softens the actual contradictions in urban society and focuses on a lumious world of the future—a vision in which the poet's misgivings about his countrymen and their urban society are secreted within the poem's subtext.

Examining Whitman's esthetic relation to New York City, Thomas finds that Whitman's poetry avoids "the openly critical, radical kind of analysis of his society," displaying less sympathy for the urban masses and their poverty than might be expected and even admiring the advancing capitalist order because of its fierce vibrancy. As a romantic city poet, Whitman needed to nourish his poetry on the vision of an ideal city so that he could accommodate urban life, with its interplay of good and evil, within the parameters of his "vitalistic Romantic philosophy." But as the historical reality of advancing capitalism and urban corruption made that dream less tenable, the later poems were deprived of this essential poetic nutriment.

The final three of Thomas's nine chapters center on the way in which the Civil War reshaped *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman's essentially Free Soil concept of a white artisanal and rural America committed to carry on the good fight pervades the earlier *Drum-Taps* poems, such as "Song of the Banner at Daybreak" and "Beat! Beat! Drums!" But later *Drum-Taps* poems, reflecting the poet's difficulty in integrating the actualities of the war with the Jacksonian ideal, generally eschew politics. The war poems and *Specimen Days* show how Whitman was shaken by the deaths of his prized generation of farm boys and artisans. Thomas makes much of Whitman's sublimated horror of death in the war poems (although he does not trace this strain through "This Compost" and other earlier writings). Psychologically, Whitman was forced to insist on the relevance of the patriotic war to his own vision of history. Seeing the war as a second American Revolution, at whose center he stood, he attempted to make *Leaves of Grass* into an inspirational "supreme fiction" embodying his vision of America's democratic potential—a vision that would supersede the mere "facts" of conventional history. The various revisions of *Leaves of Grass*—conspicuously in poems like "By Blue Ontario's Shore"—were designed to bring the post-war world into line with Whitman's vision. In some of his sharpest analysis, Thomas shows that Whitman came to view himself as his nation's historical memorialist who was destined to keep alive the Jacksonian ideal, even though it no longer meshed with historic circumstance. As the poems Whitman composed following the conflict were seldom rooted in the turbulent present—the inspiration of his best poetical work—the most significant activity in the poet's post-war career became the steady refash-

ioning of *Leaves of Grass* with the purpose, as Thomas sees it, of creating the impression that the book, from its very inception, had always embodied the democratic principle and the unitary democratic vision expressed in the Revolution and in the Civil War.

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George B. Hutchinson. *The Ecstatic Whitman: Literary Shamanism and the Crisis of the Union*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1986. xxviii, 231 pp. \$25.00.

Although a relatively short study, *The Ecstatic Whitman* is an ambitious effort which attempts nothing less than to outline a new understanding of Whitman's spirituality, relationship to his culture, sense of vocation, and poetic achievement. Regardless of its quality, such a thoroughgoing revisionist effort is likely to encounter substantial resistance. This may be even more the case when it is written by a younger scholar, as is, I assume, true of Professor Hutchinson, who is described on the book jacket as an assistant professor of English at the University of Tennessee. I admit at the beginning that I do not find myself won over by several aspects of Hutchinson's argument, but at the same time I am sympathetic to his large undertaking and impressed with many of his interpretations and insights.

Hutchinson maintains that the essential Whitman is a religious figure, and his analysis of the form and inner dynamics of Whitman's spiritual experience is indebted to historical-phenomenological scholarship such as that of the late Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade. According to this interpretation of religion, the basic structures of Whitman's religious experience are transhistorical, but at the same time the precipitate for these experiences, as well as their specific content, arise out of Whitman's particular historical situation. It should be added that Hutchinson does not deny the importance of other approaches—psychological, political, historical (in fact, he uses them)—but he sees such methods as inevitably distorting Whitman's own understanding of his intention and achievement unless they are integrated with an understanding of his spirituality.

According to Hutchinson, the type of religious experience that inspires Whitman's poetic production and informs many of his major poems is the ritualistic roleplaying and ecstatic experience of the religious shaman. Shamanism itself is defined as consisting of two elements: a belief in parallel spiritual and physical worlds, and the notion of a dualistic soul (the fixed soul that maintains the human organism and a free soul that can exit the body under certain conditions such as trance, sleep and death).

In addition, Hutchinson also draws upon the work of anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and Anthony F. C. Wallace for an analysis of the social function of religious symbols and a cross-cultural understanding of the role of a religious leader or prophet who arises during periods of radical social transformation marked by competing belief systems or a bad fit between the stubborn facts of reality and the inherited symbolic system that mediates this reality to human consciousness. These conditions spawn various forms of religious immediatism, prophets and false prophets, religious enthusiasms, and reform movements that attempt to redefine the culture's relationship to reality and to guide social change toward a new cultural equilibrium.